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ABSTRACT

During a 1979-1980 pilot project, 13 nine-week residencies by professional artists were sponsored in 10 eastern Oregon school districts with Eastern Oregon State College serving as liaison, the Northwest Area Foundation of St. Paul (Minnesota) contributing $33,500, and participating school districts adding a total of $8,000 in funding. This low local cost of $350 to $400 allowed administrators to use miscellaneous funds, eliminating solicitation of funding for an unproven program from an unconvinced school board. If the program is to be continued, 70% financing by participating school districts is expected within 4 years. Policy and procedure guidelines were adapted almost verbatim from the State Arts Commission's program. Artists were hired through on-site interviews at each school district, whenever possible. Professional qualifications and experience with young people were weighted heavily, but the greatest importance was placed on whether or not the artist had worked in rural areas. Residencies were tailored to the needs of individual districts and involved poets, abstract painters, ceramic artists, puppeteers, actors, and cartoonists. (NEC)

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THE ARTIST RESIDENCY PROGRAM IN EASTERN OREGON:

EMPHASIZING THE RURAL

by

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1979-80

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THE ARTIST RESIDENCY PROGRAM IN EASTERN OREGON, EMPHASIZING THE RURAL

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by Doug Davis
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Regional Arts Council

1979-80

On June 5 a group of educators from ten rural school districts, quite distant from one another on the map, were sitting together at a conference table in eastern Oregon. Ken Lilly, administrator in the La Grande public schools for 33 years, lapsed into an anecdote (with tongue firmly planted in cheek),

"Arbor Day was coming up, and you know the state regulations say we're always supposed to have some sort of celebration on Arbor Day -- and we do try to always have something. Well, it got to be quitting time the day before and I still hadn't thought of any way to celebrate. Then it dawned on me -- hey, our artist-in-residence is a professional actor, so on my way out of the building I stopped by to see him and said 'hey, Joe, do you think you could whip something up?' Sure enough, the next day when we planted that tree, Joe was there to read a poem and do a little skit. By golly that was the best darned Arbor Day for as far back as I can remember!"

The laughter at this point was long and loud, not because the story in itself was especially humorous, but because here was a veteran administrator poking fun at a very recent stereotype--the resident artist in the classroom environment. The unanimous verdict concerning the humor of this story signalled a victory for the artist residency program that everyone present had shared during the previous school year. Between the lines was the very serious realization that each had witnessed, in their own classrooms, professional artists making a solid and enduring contribution to the education of young people. To these rural educators, who have watched the claims of so many trendy educational programs fall short over the years, here was one that made good on its first try.

As the discussion progressed, we heard about kids who were hard to motivate getting excited about their own work for no other reason than because an artist was excited about his. Teachers told about staying after school, as late as midnight, to learn how to mix glazes and fire a kiln. Stories continued about the group of students who admitted to the poet-in-residence they never knew there was such a thing as a living poet before, or about the sixth grade girl who said,"Before this, I never really knew what a puppet was. When you said we were going to make puppets, I thought you were crazy!." In all cases resident artists were described as windows to a previously unattainable learning experience, or as just everyday people, but with a new kind of enthusiasm for looking at everyday life.

This spirited, rare forum marked the end of the 1979-80 Rural Artist Residency Program, a pilot project which planted thirteen nine-week residencies by professional artists in ten eastern Oregon school districts.

The idea for the program came about when several school districts approached the Northwest Area Foundation of St. Paul, Minnesota independently for funding for artist residencies. Although the State Arts Commission in Oregon manages a statewide residency program, these districts were not gaining the kind of access to it they wanted, at the price they wanted to pay.

Eastern Oregon State College in La Grande serves as a liason with the Northwest Area Foundation for funding projects in the region. When the College saw the shared need for artist residencies in these

school districts, a program was researched and designed by the Regional Arts Council (housed on the Eastern Oregon State College campus). A subsequent grant request was funded by the Foundation for $33590, with another $8000 to be contributed by participating school districts.

In many respects the design of the new Rural Artist Residency Program grew out of features of existing residency programs. The principles by which any residency program is made or broken involve standards of quality and diversity within the field of artist-applicants. Policy and procedure guidelines were adapted almost verbatum from the State Arts Commission's program so that the two could work in conjunction when necessary. The following, then, are a few particular program areas which may amount to something new and different, because they were designed with specific re-rional considerations in mind.

Artists were hired through on-site interviews, whenever possible, at each school district, at a rate of $2400 per nine-week residency. Professional qualifications and experience working with young people were weighted heavily, but the greatest importance was placed upon whether or not the artist had worked in rural areas. Bringing outsiders into isolated communities with three-digit populations becomes particularly risky when the outsiders have titles like "the artist" or "the poet" following them

around town.

The planning decision to make nine weeks a standard residency length had as little compromise in it as possible. Rural educators who had seen short-term artist visits of one day or one week felt they were lacking in any long range contribution to student development or to the curriculum process. Virtually all input from district administrators was asking for residency length to be as long as possible. That maximum possible length, with ten districts to be served by limited funding, became nine weeks.

The issue of how and where to work the artist into each local school was deliberately left open during the planning process. An initial assumption that residencies would be tailored to the needs of each individual district proved to be entirely irrelevant. At first it seemed districts just didn't know what their needs were as to poet, artist, puppeteer, or elementary focus verses high school focus, etc. But soon it became apparent that districts such as these, which had no full-time art teacher, needed everything!

A counseling process of sorts took place between Regional Arts Council staff and participating districts, producing results that were suprisingly varied. One tiny districtsdecided upon three ceramic artists combining for twenty-seven weeks. What remained when the residencies were over included new teacher skills, a complete new art room,and kiln facilities. One new

kiln was purchased with school district funds, and another one was purchased with proceeds from a student art sale during the course of the residency. (Admittedly, a few of the district's 120 students got a little tired of clay by about the nineteenth week.)

In a larger district a poet, an actor, an abstract painter, and a cartoonist circulated among six elementary schools on a schedule designed (and later modified) by the principals of the schools working together.

A puppeteer found that her Master's degree training in theatre games, as well as her dulcimer skills, came in handy when one sixth grade class got tired of making puppets after the fifth week.

In the case of those unexpected problems that always seem to occur in the first year of a new program, flexibility, on behalf of the artists and the administrators, always seemed to be part of the solution. As one gradeschool principal was inclined to repeat, "we're learning this stuff right along with the kids."

One goal of the Rural Artist Residency Program is that it be 75% financed by participating school districts within four years. However, since most rural districts have yet to be sold on the educational value of practicing artists in the classroom (until they try it), the program is available during the first

year at a cost of 12% to the districts. During the program's pilot year, residencies were virtually given away at a cost of $350-400 per nine weeks, all for the sake of "getting a foot in the door" with budget-conscious school boards and skeptical parents. The first year intent of the program is to allow school administrators to pay out of this or that miscellaneous fund, without having to make an unproven program an issue before an unconvinced school board. Then if the district decides to remain with the program for subsequent years, it will be expected to express this desire through an increasing financial commitment.

In one sense this localizing of the financial burden for the program can be viewed as a race between a major private funding source withdrawing its interests from the region on the one hand, and rural districts wanting the program badly enough to ante up for it, on the other. They say the arts always seem to fare for the better when economic times are low, so with this in mind, and with a bit of perseverance, such a cumbersome transfer of social responsibility might just have a chance.